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Territories of Contact: Two Australian Asylum Seeker Documentaries

In Australia over the past decade, a body of artistic work has emerged in response to hard-line federal asylum policies – most specifically, the entrenchment under both conservative and left-leaning governments of mandatory detention of unauthorized asylum seekers. While many such individuals arrive by air, the method of (attempted) arrival that has consistently sent politicians scrabbling for moral and territorial authority is maritime: the flimsy people-smuggling boats that ply their trade in the waters between Indonesia and Australia. While they differ in their modalities (including film, theatre, performative installation, visual art, protest and writing of various kinds), artistic and cultural responses to asylum seekers in Australia are almost all, one way or another, informed by affective regard for these most politicized of non-citizens, who remain ‘captured outside’ (*ex-capere*), in Giorgio Agamben’s terms,¹ national (and indeed global) zones of belonging. Arguably unparalleled in its cultural influence, film has great potential to reach wide audiences, and documentary film, in particular, has a unique capacity to enable asylum seekers and refugees to ‘appear’, and to ‘speak’ as and for themselves. This is not to claim the documentary as an innocent form: the voice an asylum seeker or refugee may use, and the terms on which he or she may be heard and made recognizable, are dependent upon a series of representational acts, and, crucially, on the way in which cross-cultural contact takes place.

In this article, I examine two Australian feature length documentary films, *Letters to Ali* (2004), written and directed by Clara Law and co-written by Eddie L.C. Fong, and *Hope* (2007), directed by Steve Thomas. In *Letters to Ali*, affective epistolary contact is the key mode of cross-cultural engagement between an Australian family and ‘Ali’,² an unaccompanied fifteen-year-old Hazara Afghan asylum seeker who, for most of the filming process, was detained at the Port Hedland immigration detention centre in Australia’s remote north west.³ Using a

DV camcorder, Law documents the Australian family’s three-week, 2,800 mile journey through the desert to visit the boy, to whom they have been writing and speaking over the phone for a period of eighteen months, and have already met on one occasion. The journey calls into question ideas about national territory and national identity for the family members (Trish Kerbi, Rob Silberstein, and their four children) and the immigrant filmmakers. In *Hope*, Amal Basry’s self-representation as an Iraqi woman is positioned amid politically contentious crosscurrents, her story being synonymous with a regional tragedy. On 19 October 2001, 353 asylum seekers drowned when the unidentified vessel, SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X) sank in international waters between Indonesia and Australia. Of forty-five survivors, seven were resettled in Australia. Basry was one of these, and prior to her death in 2006, she served determinedly as an advocate for other survivors and as the voice, by proxy, of the drowned.

Both films follow their filmmakers’ trajectories from ‘local’ urban and suburban living environments to the fringes of Australian national space – in *Letters to Ali*, the vast desert interior and north western coast, and, in *Hope*, the closely patrolled ocean extending to Indonesia. These are the films’ contact zones, the literal and metaphorical margins where Australians and asylum seekers encounter one another. The films embed stories of transnational displacement in contexts of ‘home’, at the same time as they test the spatial and embodied limits of the local; as well as this, they cohere a certain kind of Australianness, a politicized moral humanitarianism galvanized by affective (whether saddened, ashamed or outraged) rejection of state biopolitics. The documentaries perform, then, dual cultural work: offering certain kinds of representation, of voice, to newcomers, and reformulating or remaking an Australian identity that is seen to have been hijacked by militarized, exclusionary sovereign power in the post-2001 era.

A cornerstone of this power is Australia’s federal policy of mandatory immigration detention, instituted by the Paul Keating Labour government in 1992, and extended in 1994 with the removal of a 273-day time limit. When, in late August 2001, John Howard’s Liberal-National conservative coalition government scandalously refused to allow the Norwegian container ship, MV Tampa, to enter Australian territorial waters after it rescued 438 asylum seekers in proximate international waters, the ‘exceptional’ situation was dealt with by the passing of seven acts relating to migration, all in the month of September. The legislation’s main purpose was to excise certain sea-bound territories from Australia’s

migration zone, ensuring that few asylum seekers would ever reach Australian territory. In tandem with excision, the government introduced offshore detention, transporting asylum seekers to the islands of Nauru, Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) or Christmas Island, thousands of miles from the Australian mainland, where they were not entitled to Australian appeals procedures. This Pacific Solution, as it was named, normalized punitive deterrence as the method by which Australia engages with non-belonging non-citizens, typifying what Agamben has identified as the 'continuing tendency in all of the Western democracies' for an explicit declaration of a state of exception to be 'gradually replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government'.⁴

Letters to Ali and *Hope* are catalyzed by resistance to the governmental techniques implemented in 2001. But if that momentous year (in both local and global terms) put it unprecedentedly high on the Australian public radar, the issue of asylum has, since 2009, been steadily clawing back to the forefront of national debate. The degree to which asylum seekers are at any given time the subjects of hot-button political discourse can in part be indexed by events at sea. In April 2009, a Indonesian fishing vessel that had been intercepted by a Navy patrol off Australia's north west coast exploded, killing five of the forty-seven Afghan asylum seekers on board and injuring dozens more; a 2010 coronial inquest found that 'a passenger or passengers' had deliberately sabotaged the vessel.⁵ Since then, increased numbers of unauthorized boat arrivals, a subsequent swelling of the detention population,⁶ and a string of maritime tragedies have spurred political leaders on to exhibit geopolitical authority. The current Labour government, led by Prime Minister Julia Gillard (who ousted Kevin Rudd in a leadership challenge in 2010), is under intense pressure from an opposition that exploits every opportunity to remind the electorate of the government's failure to 'stop the boats'. The government has struggled to enforce its iteration of transnational biopolitics: in July 2011, it signed a bilateral deal to transport asylum seekers to Malaysia, where they would, Gillard stated, go 'to the back of the queue' for processing.⁷ This deal was halted the following month by an Australian High Court intervention. But, as of mid-2012, the government is proceeding with plans to reopen detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island.⁸

Witnessing, appearing, performing

In the representation of stories of displacement, a great deal of capital is

attached to words: specifically, the 'real words' of witness-subjects, which are held to offer an umbilical connection to the *truth* of experience. The notions of authenticity that are typically bestowed on documentary film are a consequence of the convergence of the *real word* with the *real body*, something that is of critical significance in contexts of asylum and detention. But, as *Letters to Ali* and *Hope* show, documentaries are not always and simply a format for unified 'appearance'; rather than attempting to weigh the question of how, or indeed if, verisimilitude is produced in the films, I want to foreground the conditions under which representation, and thus recognition, occurs – to highlight the inseparability of public witnessing from performativity, and, more broadly, from the manipulation of *who* appears, *where*, and *how*.

In *Letters to Ali*, the eponymous subject cannot appear as and for himself: his identity is protected for legal reasons, and, for most of the film, he stands at a remove from the viewer, cameras being forbidden inside the detention centre. I have gestured to Agamben's concept of the exceptional body being 'captured outside' spheres of national belonging; for Agamben, the inclusion through coercive exclusion of illegitimate bodies is the key mechanism by which sovereignty is formulated and fortified. Ali is positioned at the outer limits of belonging and, therefore, at the limits of representable personhood. The effects of his capture outside Australia continue even beyond the razor wire. Near the end of the film, following news that Ali has been released into community detention in the city of Adelaide, Law accompanies the Kerbi-Silberstein family as they drive to visit him; she blurs all shots of Ali, a legal caution that inadvertently exemplifies his precarious presence in the nation 'proper', marking him and yet rendering him phantom-like as he interacts with ordinary Australians whose faces and bodies are clearly visible, clearly *present*. Ali's subjectivity is translated – literally renamed – as a de-specified symbol of the executive powers that both filmmakers and family decry, even as he is invested with their hopes and desires for a reconstituted Australian community. This is not to discount the value of the traces of Ali offered in the film, much less the reciprocal benefits of the Kerbi-Silberstein family's touching relationship with him, but to recognize that the film is as much a testament to the totalizing power of a sovereign authority to curtail acts of (self-)representation as it is a vehicle for marginalized voices.

Law harnesses this curtailment to unify the film's ethics and aesthetics. She rarely appears on-screen and does not vocally narrate the film, using instead on-screen written text (subtitles and intertitles designed by Sarah Lucy) that creates a meditative mood and suggests the intimacy of a hand-

written letter. For the most part, Ali's personal history is inscribed in this way, as well as via interviews with Kerbi-Silberstein family members and one-sided snatches of their phone conversations with him. In the film's second half, after the completion of the road journey, Law juxtaposes Kerbi's relatively detailed oral responses to keyword prompts, including 'ancestors' and 'sea', with on-screen text that conveys, in the third person, Ali's responses to the same words: 'Ali told me he had no ancestors / His parents came from elsewhere / Just one family, nothing else'. Toward the end of the film, the viewer is offered a rare prolonged shot of Law, in side view, silhouetted against a window as she sits on the floor in the darkened interior of her house. She is speaking to Ali on the phone as he recalls a recent nightmare; her minimal spoken words are accompanied by subtitles that summarize his side of the conversation. The 'Ali' that emerges in these ways is a linguistic and cultural translation, an amalgamation of messages. Gillian Whitlock argues, with reference to a collection of letters between Australians – including Kate Durham, whose series of paintings are a central feature of *Hope* – and detainees at the Nauru detention centre, that these letters represent a unique kind of 'theatre for the performance of the self', containing (in stark contrast to the cautious self-performance demanded by the official immigration interview) the promise of empathic reciprocity: a 'delicate transaction' where the vast gap in status, autonomy, and opportunity that separates Australians from asylum seekers might momentarily be subsumed by mutual human recognition.⁹ For Ali, an unaccompanied minor, correspondence with the Kerbi-Silberstein family precipitates a particularly intimate reorientation of kinship links, as he starts to call Kerbi 'Mum' – implying a renunciation of his own mother that unsettles Kerbi. While this level of intimacy is not accessible to the viewer, it is largely by reading Law's subtitles and intertitles that we come to bear witness, however indirectly, to Ali.

In contrast to *Letters to Ali*, *Hope* is dominated by the bold self-presentation of its refugee-witness. Basry devoted her life in Australia to speaking publicly about SIEV X; and when Thomas met her, she had already become, as he puts it, 'something of a celebrity in refugee circles'. Despite the emotional pain involved in repeatedly recounting trauma, and an initial hesitance about being interviewed, Basry's desire to speak on behalf of those who lost their lives, and of the other survivors,¹⁰ propels the making of *Hope* and, as Australian film critic, David Stratton, observes, she 'easily dominates the film in which she's the star'.¹¹ The need to remember is made more urgent by the lack of formal resolution regarding SIEV X: references in survivor testimonies (including Basry's) to a ship's

lights, aeroplanes, and reports that the boat had been under surveillance when it left Indonesia, have left troubling questions unanswered. A 2002 Australian Senate Select Committee – at which no survivors were invited to testify – concluded of SIEV X: 'the Committee finds it extraordinary that a major human disaster could occur in the vicinity of a theatre of intensive Australian operations, and remain undetected until three days after the event, without any concern being raised within intelligence and decision making circles'.¹² Early in Thomas' film, Basry reveals, in her halting English, how the historical necessity to memorialize, to testify to the tragedy, is imbricated with a personal necessity to make meaning out of inexplicable survival:

I ask my God why I'm still alive; I said maybe I still alive because maybe I going to tell the world what happened to us; I going to tell the story about the tragedy of our boat; I going to tell what happened to Iraqi people, why we escaped from our country; I want to explain why we travel by this boat; there is no way; there is no choice; we must travel by boat.

Later, she describes a dream in which drowning children are pulling at her hair, demanding that she tells what is happening to them, and she is reminded that she has a 'big responsibility, because I saw everything in my eyes'. Basry's style of speech is compelling: she demonstrates rhetorical and performative abilities, using repetition, protracted pauses, and metaphor as she braids her individual story with the collective story of those who experienced SIEV X, and, ultimately, with the people of Iraq. This sense of historical relationality, which is essentially a compassionate intersubjective consciousness, enables Basry to recuperate and refract her experience as an international asylum story.

Thomas' account of his relationship with Basry is that he started making a film *about* her and ended up making one *with* her. And indeed, a certain amount of collaboration is apparent. In the first third of the film, Thomas states in voice-over, 'after tolerating my earnest filmmaking intentions for a while, Amal told me what *she* wanted to do'. The short interlude that follows is inspired by Basry's vision of a video clip that would capture her exile and longing: Thomas portrays her walking along the banks of Melbourne's Yarra River, which reminds her of the Tigris, while a love song that she heard in Iran after fleeing Baghdad plays in the background. Later, upon her request, Thomas shows excerpts from a family video Amal brings back from a visit to Iran. Thomas' voice frames these moments, as it does the entire film, providing the authorized narrative; for all Basry's interpolations, the viewer is never in any doubt that directorial control lies

with the director. Finally, Basry's battle with breast cancer and her death, movingly portrayed towards the end of the film, transforms a dialogic process into a eulogic one.

Although *Hope* is dominated by the increasingly close relationship between Thomas and Basry, other relationships and exchanges provide crucial components of the film. One of these is Basry's friendship with Kate Durham, the painter and activist at whose exhibition of SIEV X paintings Thomas first heard of Basry. While *Letters to Ali* is marked by the motif of on-screen text, *Hope* owes much of its aesthetic and affective intensity to Durham's series of SIEV X paintings, one 20cm x 20cm panel for each of the 353 drowned. Throughout the film, these images are faded in and out of close shots of the ocean's surface. This underscores a remarkable imaginative exchange between Basry and Durham. For Basry, the paintings – ghostly faces and lifeless bodies being submerged by the waves – encapsulate precisely the horror of the event. She describes her response to seeing the works for the first time:

Look to the colours, to the water. When I saw her picture the first, I'm shocked. Oh God, I feel I'm still in the ocean. I ask Kate, 'you travelled with us?' She said, 'no, I just imagined'. I told her you are very clever. Because your picture talk ... it look like me; it look like my eyes in the darkness; it look like my eyes when I believe that I am going to die.

Durham's concentrated creative engagement and Basry's response show just how much the story of SIEV X comprises an intersubjective weaving of memory and imagination, intimate survivor testimony, and empathic supporter representation.

Landscapes and oceanscapes

The wordless opening minutes of *Letters to Ali* re-sensitize Australian viewers to a familiar suburban environment. Law, an immigrant from Hong Kong, uses on-screen text to transition from a wide shot of the bustling Hong Kong harbour and the interior of a high-rise apartment to suburban Melbourne, where, as we read, she lives 'close to the earth'. These images are eerily quiet: the camera surveys streets and green parklands, birdlife and seasonal changes, all empty of people. Law's vision of 'a vast country / With very few people' is one that pointedly questions the rationale for mandatory detention. The ambitious road trip from the idyllic Kerbi-Silberstein country home in the hills east of Melbourne to Port Hedland takes the family and filmmakers, Law and Fong, into the red centre, a desert landscape that is iconically 'Australian' and yet rarely

encountered directly by the vast majority of the nation's inhabitants, who cluster around the coastal metropolitan regions of the east, south, and south west. Australian film critic, Margaret Pomeranz, describes the film's desert setting as 'that red heart that ... is [at] the back of all of our brains'.¹³ *Letters to Ali* suggests that this 'red heart' is a territory in which Australians must reckon with their own belonging. At one point the travellers pass through the location of an Aboriginal community. Shots of dilapidated buildings and burnt out cars and fleeting images of townspeople watching the convoy pass are followed by text that informs us of appalling Aboriginal mortality statistics: 'They die younger than the other Australians, by 20 years.' This is accompanied by a sombre section of Paul Grabowsky's piano and string score, and punctuated by the roar of Law and Fong's vehicle on the dirt road, barking dogs, and the throaty, almost-human call of the Australian raven. As Bernadette Brennan notes, the scene briefly apprehends another dimension of sovereign-stranger relations: 'At this moment we understand that "Ali" is not the only person who has come to this land uninvited.'¹⁴ The desert tests the very meaning of settler Australianness, its practices of territorial authority, as well as an affective moral commitment to a non-Australian.

In *Hope*, a different border zone is brought into view. The film's opening scene establishes the ocean as a pervasive motif: taking in the rhythmic crash of waves and squawking seabirds, the camera pans across the water at a small Melbourne beach to reveal Basry walking along the sand. The ocean is figured as an isolated space, a deathscape (a vision encapsulated in the Durham paintings), but also as inseparable from Australian civic and political life. When Thomas accompanies Basry to Australia's Parliament House in the capital city, Canberra, she looks down at the empty House of Representatives from the viewing gallery and states, 'Here. Here. In this place. They decide to forget us. Here. They didn't say the truth.' Basry's words not only instantiate the controversy that still lingers over the SIEV X tragedy, but also show up in stark spatial or territorial terms the interdependency of the formal, efficient seat of Australian power and the disorderly swathe of the ocean.

A significant section of *Hope* depicts Thomas' visit to Indonesia. This pilgrimage of sorts was supposed to be undertaken with Basry, but when Thomas arrives on his flight from Australia, two hours after Basry, he discovers to his horror that she has been refused entry at Jakarta airport because she is on a blacklist (most likely due to her previous illegal entry). He books into the hotel where Basry and her son lived for seven months after being rescued from the ocean, and visits the hotel they stayed at

before setting out for Australia, filming a children's playground in the hotel garden, a place with fond memories for Basry. Finally, Thomas travels to a wharf from which the SIEV X probably departed. He walks to the end of the empty wooden platform and performs a simple ceremony, placing flowers in the water and tearfully speaking of the known and unknown victims, and the survivors. Basry had expressed her desire to place flowers in the ocean to farewell the drowned, but in this emotional scene, the viewer is acutely reminded that the story being told is not just Basry's: Thomas maps a personal journey here, performing an act of mourning for the SIEV X asylum seekers, and, in so doing, solemnizing his self-identification as a compassionate Australian. While *Letters to Ali* does not concern itself as overtly as *Hope* with Asian space, Law's Hong Kong roots produce her film's haunting final image, a cloud formation of (the on-screen text tells us) a mother dragon bringing its child home. Law reads the cloud image as a sign of the 'miracle' Ali needs. In both films, then, Asia is seen to offer symbolic or sacred understanding, to which audiences may affectively gain access.

Although the majority of people who have sought Australia's protection in the last decade have originated from Afghanistan, Iran or Iraq, their setting-off point from ports in Indonesia means that the transnational lens through which they tend to be refracted is an Asian one. The relationship that Australia and Australians have with asylum seekers, whether policy-based, embodied or, as in most cases, imagined, is inextricably tied to Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. A persistent psycho-geography of invasion from the Asian north that, as Ien Ang argues, has long underpinned the settler Australian imaginary¹⁵ is complicated more recently by certain geopolitical realities in a globalized world. Notwithstanding economic interdependence, the connectedness of Australia and Asia has been underscored by discourse that now explicitly works to formulate asylum as a regional issue, to be dealt with by regional 'partners'. Former Prime Minister Rudd maintained that even as Indonesia is chief among the 'friends and partners' with whom Australia has 'integrated [its] ... border protection efforts', it is also a repository of people smugglers, 'the vilest form of human life' who should 'rot in hell'.¹⁶ And, as I have noted, Prime Minister Gillard has attempted to authorize her government's version of 'regional relations' *vis-à-vis* asylum seekers with Malaysia, and latterly, Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The Middle Eastern origins of most asylum seekers today are frequently collapsed into an ongoing Australian project of articulating an ambivalent relationship with Asia that is at once 'across borders' and 'between neighbours'.

Remaking 'Australianness'

Even a cursory viewing of *Letters to Ali* and *Hope* confirms that filmmakers and subjects alike are opposed to Australian federal asylum policies. Law's intertitles repeatedly describe the Kerbi-Silberstein family's three-week road journey to visit Ali as 'a long march', a not insignificant choice of words that simultaneously situates it internationally (via a reference to China, of course, but also to forced marches at the end of the Second World War) and locally (the term 'long march' having been used by Aboriginal Australian activists for decades to refer to their resistance to oppression and injustice). By invoking it in her film, Law establishes the journey to Ali as a moral act, a commitment to freedom involving personal sacrifice. Other international associations explicate Kerbi's and Silberstein's views: she speaks of her desire to learn more about Australia's detention centres in the context of recalling a recent visit to Dachau, while he speaks of his Polish father's and German mother's resistance against the Nazis, and likens the profoundly detrimental effect of incarceration on his father with Ali's detention. Thomas situates his film in relation to a single administration: the opening intertitle of *Hope* explains that 'A feature of the Howard Federal Government from 1996 to 2007 was its determination to turn back or detain asylum seekers heading for Australia by boat.' Both films are part of a broader body of representation in Australia that has worked to discredit and undermine government policy – and, more fundamentally, government-led narratives of nationhood, security, and belonging. This is the context in which asylum seeker and refugee stories have been made recognizable. Out of this context, it becomes necessary to ask whether these acts of representation serve their non-citizen subjects as comprehensively as they serve a certain kind of Australianness.

James Goodman contends that Australia's refugee solidarity movements since 2001 have been bifurcated in terms of national and global preoccupations, the former 'geared to national policy change, effectively to remaking "the nation", and reclaiming national pride against the shame of refugee detention', and the latter more radically expansive in expressing 'anger and outrage in the name of human empathy and dignity'.¹⁷ Both, he maintains, are underpinned by deep emotional responses to the other, necessary for impelling cross-cultural engagement. While I would characterize the two preoccupations in terms of a layering rather than a bifurcation, it can be said that *Letters to Ali* and *Hope* share some of the global strand's cosmopolitan sensibilities and ideals, but return repeatedly to the civic reference point of the nation – its meanings and its members.

Goodman's discussion refers in particular to activism in the form of public demonstrations and volunteer programmes, but can be applied to the counter-discursive, counter-memorializing work at play in *Letters to Ali* and *Hope*. Without wishing to deny the specificity of techniques and processes employed by artists working in various genres, I would argue that the filmmakers were ideologically and affectively engaged in much the same project as Australian activists and supporters who, in recent years, have marched to the razor-wire fences of detention centres (amateur footage of such gatherings appears in *Letters to Ali*, along with Law's interview with protestor, Adam Myonvell, who was charged with harbouring escaped detainees), or rallied in the nation's metropolitan spaces, or been engaged in detention centre visiting and letter-writing campaigns. These actions, like the films, unsettle the normative territoriality of 'nation' space, and normative understandings of who belongs to/in it. Both only make sense in the presence of an audience (or at least an interlocutor), whether constituted by embodied proximity or technological mediation. But in the case of documentary film as a genre, a particular kind of reflective engagement is encouraged. The documentary form is arguably held to be more 'legitimate' and 'trustworthy' than the anarchic and unpredictable public protest, and documentary watching is often a 'serious', pedagogic activity involving geographically dispersed and potentially large audiences in the darkened silence of a cinema or the privacy of their own home. Working in concert with this seriousness are affective processes. A recent study by communication researchers, Heather L. LaMarre and Kristen D. Landreville, indicate that documentaries elicit stronger affective responses than fictional films on the same topic: comparing responses to films on the Rwandan genocide, they found that 'the documentary group reported higher levels of affect, as well as increased issue concern and learning', and concluded, 'as a form of political information, [documentaries] have the potential to strongly influence public opinion'.¹⁸

Whatever this may imply in terms of the significations and intersections of truth, pedagogy, affect and community, it underscores the importance of *Letters to Ali* and *Hope* as works that, as I have argued, remake Australianness by offering audiences a moral humanitarian national identification, opposed to the perceived exclusionary violence of detention and deterrence. Both films may represent potent tools for the 'affective embedding' that Goodman identifies as 'a precondition for sustained mobilization', or more precisely, 'cognitive reflection and action'.¹⁹ The films had the potential to achieve this affective embedding

across a fairly broad sweep of Australian society (though this does not guarantee concomitant organization and action). They have been screened at cinemas across the country – *Letters to Ali*, in particular, was distributed by major Australian companies, Palace Films and Madman Entertainment – as well as abroad, and have featured at film festivals locally and internationally. Both films were afforded (and legitimated by) critical attention in major media outlets.²⁰ This is not to disregard the films' small, low-budget statuses, and the role of pre-existing refugee support and advocacy communities in cohering their viewing audiences – though it should be noted that these communities counted among their numbers public figures, including former conservative Prime Minister of Australia turned refugee supporter, Malcolm Fraser, who is interviewed in *Letters to Ali*. Insofar as the films remake Australian identity, they build on existing politicized communities. Law's film was able to be produced when, as on-screen text informs us, 'People threw in their support / With 100% discount on editing, mixing, video mastering ... / Then an editor, a composer, a sound designer, a lawyer' came on board; similarly, when Thomas was unable to secure sufficient funding via the usual government agency routes, *Hope* was seen to completion through a grassroots fundraising campaign initiated by its producer, Sue Brooks.²¹

I have sought to trace some of the tensions and contradictions at play in documentary film as a form that is simultaneously able to lay special claim to directness or truthfulness, and retain careful control over who appears, where, and how. *Letters to Ali* and *Hope* are part of an accumulation of artistic and cultural texts that have, since 2001, helped to constitute Australian moral humanitarianism, *vis-à-vis* asylum, as an imagined community. Lines of affective multicultural contact – crisscrossing between filmmakers, subjects, and audiences – are what energize both films. These offer alienated newcomers a stake in negotiating their places in Australia, even as they facilitate a performance of Australian identity by filmmakers and citizen-subjects. This identity is personal but also collective, and politicized. The epistolary fragments of an unseen Ali, and Basry's own brave testimony, are figured into a larger ongoing project, made to stand for a flawed asylum policy. Whether asylum seekers or refugees can make themselves recognizable to Australians on their own terms within the parameters of this project, and whether, indeed, they can represent themselves outside the familiar keys of trauma, violation, and redemption, are questions that trouble, to a greater or lesser extent, all asylum accounts that are presented, across the borderlines, for audiences in secure and prosperous 'host' nations.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2000), p. 40.
2. Ali is not his real name; the boy's identity was protected owing to fears that the film's explicit criticism of government policy might jeopardize his asylum claim.
3. The Port Hedland immigration detention centre opened in 1991, was privatized by the Howard government in the late 1990s, and closed in 2004. It has since been transformed into Beachfront Village, an accommodation facility to support the town's booming commodities industry.
<<http://www.beachfrontvillage.com.au/-Beachfront-Motel-.html>> accessed 11 June 2011.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), p. 14.
5. Greg Cavanagh, *Inquest into the Death of Mohammed Hassan Ayubi, Muzafar Ali Sefarali, Mohammed Amen Zamen, Awar Nadar, Baquer Husani*, Darwin Coroner's Court, 17 March 2010, p. 5. Available at <<http://www.defence.gov.au/siev36/inquest.htm>> accessed 31 August 2012.
6. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship updates detention statistics regularly. See Immigration Detention Statistics Summary, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Government, <<http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/facilities/statistics/>>.
7. Under the terms of the deal, Australia would have taken 4,000 refugees from Malaysia over a four-year period in exchange for 800 unauthorized asylum seekers. Bonny Symons-Brown, 'Australia, Malaysia to Trade Asylum Seekers: Gillard', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 2011, <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/australia-malaysia-to-trade-asylum-seekers-gillard-20110507-1ed1a.html>> accessed 30 June 2011.
8. For political analysis of the Gillard Government's agreements with Nauru and Papua New Guinea, see Rowan Callick, 'Nauru and PNG Asylum-Seeker Deals Not the Same', *The Australian*, 12 August 2012, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/nauru-and-png-asylum-seeker-deals-not-the-same/story-fn59nm2j-1226462000808>> accessed 31 August 2012.
9. Gillian Whitlock, 'Letters from Nauru', *Life Writing*, 5:2 (2008), p. 211.
10. Thomas follows Basyr to a SIEV X fourth anniversary memorial event in Canberra, noting, 'Amal is the only survivor here who didn't lose loved ones in the ocean, but her command of English enables her to speak for those who did'.
11. David Stratton, review of *Hope*, *At the Movies*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, <<http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2259589.htm>> accessed 12 June 2011.
12. 'Executive Summary', *Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident*, Parliament of Australia, 23 October 2002, <http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/maritime_incident_ctte/report/a06.htm> accessed 21 May 2011.
13. Margaret Pomeranz, review of *Letters to Ali*, *At the Movies*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005, <<http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s1203207.htm>> accessed 12 June 2011.
14. Bernadette Brennan, 'Travelling Towards Ourselves: Rights and Recognition in Clara Law's *Letters to Ali*', *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 3:1 (2009), p. 19.
15. Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 129-30.
16. Kevin Rudd, quoted in 'PM Tells People Smugglers to "Rot in Hell"', *Lateline*,

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 18 April 2009, <<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2008/s2546319.htm>> accessed 18 April 2009.

17. James Goodman, 'Refugee Solidarity: Between National Shame and Global Outrage', *Theorizing Emotions: Sociological Explorations and Applications*, eds. Debra Hopkins, Jochen Kleres, Helena Flam and Helmut Kuzmics (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2009), pp. 270-71.
18. Heather L. LaMarre and Kristen D. Landreville, 'When is Fiction as Good as Fact? Comparing the Influence of Documentary and Historical Reenactment Films on Engagement, Affect, Issue Interest, and Learning', *Mass Communication and Society*, 12:4 (2009), p. 550.
19. Goodman, 'Refugee Solidarity', p. 272.
20. Both films were given largely favourable reviews on Australia's long-running film review television programme, *At the Movies*, hosted by veteran critics, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton (see endnotes 11 and 13). *Letters to Ali* was reviewed and discussed in Australia's major broadsheet newspapers, *The Australian* (national), *The Age* (Melbourne), *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane) and *The West Australian* (Perth), as well as several smaller newspapers, and in *Variety* magazine. *Hope* was reviewed and discussed in several newspapers, including *The Age*, *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), *The Canberra Times* and *The Courier-Mail*.
21. 'Funding Story: Interview with the Director - Steve Thomas', <<http://www.hopedocumentary.com.au/hope/about-funding.htm>> accessed 14 June 2011.